

## The Complicity of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust

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A few days ago, exactly on April 6, 1997, a very remarkable exhibit came to an end. After being shown in 16 German and Austrian cities, the exhibit "The War of Destruction - Crimes of the German Army 1941 - 1944" came to a close in the City Hall of Munich, "The City of the Movement" as it was called during the Nazi period. The exhibit was organized by Hamburg's Institute for Social Research and it was shown within the context of "Power and Destructiveness in the 20th Century," a project financed by independent funds. For more than one year, four scholars extensively investigated the war crimes of the regular German army in Eastern Europe. They were able to use the rich material already in existence in Moscow, Russia, and Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The executions of the civilian population were exemplified by tracing the campaign of the German Sixth Army, which was eventually liquidated at Stalingrad; by presenting the results of the German occupation of Belorussia, which lasted three years; and finally, by showing the German occupation of Serbia. By the time the exhibit reached Munich, it has been already shown, as mentioned before, in 16 German and Austrian cities and it was viewed by more than 150,000 visitors. Most of the experts agreed with the findings of the exhibit. For most of them, there was nothing new in the claim that also the average soldier was used and often participated, voluntarily or involuntarily, in the massacres. The well-known military historian, Manfred Messerschmidt, felt that the exhibit was successful. The holocaust expert Götz Aly saw in this picture and document exhibit the proof that the invasion of Russia in World War II was the worst example of a war of conquest, enslavement, and destruction that the modern times witnessed. Critics of the exhibit pointed to the fact that the exhibit is not well-balanced, i.e. that there are not enough examples shown of ordinary soldiers who behaved decently and sometimes even disobeyed immoral orders.

Nothing unusual occurred during the exhibit tour until the recent stop in Munich. The ruling Bavarian government headed by the conservative Christian Socialist Union saw in the exhibit an insult to the 19 million brave German soldiers who served during the Second World War in the "Wehrmacht," the regular German army. The exhibit in Munich brought also a violent protest of about 5,000 neo-Nazis and old veterans of the army who marched in Munich on March 1, 1997 to protest the display. Allow me to quote now an associated press report from Munich:

Thirty-six Serb civilians visit Gerhard Gronefeld sometimes as he sleeps. He photographed them just before they were hung or shot to death by a German army unit in 1941. On those haunted nights, he awakens in terror with his memories of the pleading eyes of the Serb victims - thirty-five men and one woman. "Those eyes, they will never give me peace," says the eighty-five-year-old Gronefeld who went from battle to battle as a propaganda photographer for the German armed forces. Eleven of his photographs of the massacre in Panevo, Serbia, are part of the traveling exhibit that documents atrocities

committed in the Balkans and the Soviet Union by the German regular armed forces, the Wehrmacht. Gronefeld goes on to say that thirty-six civilians were rounded up at random in revenge for the killing of two SS officers by Serb partisans. Gronefeld photographed the civilians taken to the cemetery where they were executed. "In the eyes before they died, I saw the last appeal for mercy," Gronefeld recalls. Eighteen of them were hung and the rest were taken to the cemetery wall and were executed by firing squad." Gronefeld photographed a soldier who drew his pistol and finished off a wounded victim.

Such pictures, documents, and discussions raise again the question of the German culpability during the Second World War and the Holocaust. Last year I edited and translated the English edition of the book *The German Public and the Persecution of the Jews 1933-1945*. The first part of the book gives us eyewitness reports by Jews, half-Jews and non-Jews and the second part presents interpretations by experts in various fields. We have ample proof that all areas of German life and that all institutions of the Third Reich participated in one way or another in humiliation, destruction, and even in murder of millions of innocent people. We have plenty of proof of the viciousness of the justice system which persecuted the Jews even before the Nuremberg laws were passed. Unfortunately, we can also see that all of the churches in Germany carry a great guilt by contributing to the destruction of the European Jewery. We can talk about the discriminatory policies of the artistic and cultural institutions, the economic cannibalization of Jewish estates within the context of the "Dejudaization of the German Economy," and even about the well-known collaboration of many non-Germans in executing "the final solution."

One of the most discussed and most controversial aspects of the complicity in the atrocities, particularly in Eastern Europe, is that of the regular German military. The first West German government after the war under Konrad Adenauer masterminded the myth of the disciplined and innocent regular German army, which was misused and betrayed by the evil Führer. The West German media perpetuated the pictures of the brave, heroic fighters, who fought the Communist barbarism of the East and every young German child growing up in West Germany was able to indulge in thousands of cheap paperbacks describing the heroic defense of the fatherland. The myth culminated in the heroic resistance of the army to the madman Hitler, resulting in the assassination attempt of the 20th of July, 1944.

Cynically, we can say that the attempt to assassinate Hitler was perhaps the only deed worth mentioning as an example of the resistance within the German army to the National Socialist dictatorship. Can you think of any others? The demonstrators in Munich did not like to see that myth destroyed. They questioned the authenticity of the pictures and the documents. But even the commissioned experts provided by the German government had to certify the authenticity of the pictures of burning villages, executed men and women, butchered children, and humiliated "Untermenschen," the "subhumans." Featured is a letter from a German sergeant, Robert Rupp, to his wife in Ingolstadt, written on November 22, 1941, from the Russian front. He writes that he is moved to tears while thinking of some of the saddest scenes he has recently witnessed. He is deeply ashamed and upset by the lack of human compassion. His own comrades are guilty of

burning whole villages and massacring innocent civilians. In the last paragraph of the letter, he tells his wife that, once he is going to see her again, he will need to spend a lot of time crying. However, two weeks later on December 4, 1941, Robert Rupp was killed in the attack on Moscow. Interestingly enough, nobody from the German Defense Ministry is even coming close to the exhibit, especially not the Defense Minister, Volker Rühle. At least, his predecessor, Hans Apel, declared in 1982 that "During the National Socialism, the fighting forces were partially guilty of participation and partially they were misused without their own guilt."

Any historian knows that the German war against the people of Eastern Europe was a war of total destruction. So, for example, on October 10, 1941, Fieldmarshal Walter von Reichenau, who was at that time the commander of the Sixth Army, which will later be completely annihilated at Stalingrad, issued the following order: "The army has to be prepared to fight against the Jewish- Bolshevik system. The soldier in Eastern Europe is not only a fighter according to the rules of warfare, but also a carrier of an unyielding ideology. Therefore, the soldier has to have full understanding for the necessity for a hard but just vengeance against the Jewish subhuman. Only in such a fashion will we be fulfilling our historical task, to liberate the German nation once for all from the Asian-Jewish danger." By the way, this particular order was picked up by Hitler personally with enthusiasm and distributed to other generals to share it with their troops. Not only in the above-mentioned exhibit, but also in other archives, we have documents of hundreds of orders which called for a systematic destruction of Jews, Communists and even prisoners of war.

As I mentioned earlier, there is no doubt about the complicity of many German people in the Holocaust, directly or indirectly. The degree of that complicity could be debated. From my book, I would like to quote the personal account of Walter Grab, who eventually escaped from Vienna and became the head of the German Studies Department at the University of Tel Aviv. He writes:

I was on my way home on the afternoon of April 25, 1938, six weeks after the Nazi takeover in Austria. There was a Jewish Gymnasium close to our apartment, in the cellar of the house at 20 Liechtenstein Street. I sometimes went there to do gymnastics when I was a child of seven or eight years old. When I came close to this house, I was stopped by a chain of Nazis who wore armbands with swastikas. One of them yelled at me: "Are you a Jew?" When I said yes, he pushed me towards the house where the gymnasium was and ordered me to climb down the cellar stairway. Jewish children used to exercise in this large cellar, which was approximately thirty meters long. There was a lot of exercise equipment and there were also rooms where Jewish boys and girls could change clothes. In the gym's lobby, I saw about twenty to thirty Jews who the Nazis had caught before me. They were crowded into a corner. A Nazi pushed me in there, too. The large gym as well as the lobby were--if you'll pardon the expression--completely full of shit. The floor and the walls were entirely covered with excrement. It stank savagely. By my estimation, a whole regiment of the SA or the SS or some other Nazis relieved themselves shortly before they began to round up the Jews; the excrement was still fresh and moist. Fifteen to twenty Nazis stood in the changing rooms in addition to the Jews.

Behind me more Jews were pushed down the cellar stairways so that there were finally thirty-five or forty of us--only men. The Nazis had great fun; they amused themselves tremendously because they could now show off their courage with these helpless and confused Jews whom they chased into this gymnasium filled with excrement. They laughed and yelled for ten or fifteen minutes and made fun of us because we were afraid. Finally, one of them stepped in front and said: "You Jews have left your gymnasium to us in such a filthy state. Jewish gymnasia are so dirty. Again, one can see how filthy Jews are. And now you have to lick everything clean." What can one say when at the mercy of these barbarians who appear as if they have a human face? Nothing. We stood there silently. We were at their mercy, and anything seemed possible to us. However, they only wanted to have a little fun. They came up with this idea in order to insult and demean the Jews. This was not an ordered campaign like the pogrom of November 9, when the Jews' stores were plundered and their apartments were destroyed. No, this fun was genuinely mob-inspired. I am not sure whether jokes like this took place in other cities, but they look place in Vienna. We were completely at the mercy of these Nazis. And they had tremendous fun while we squeezed together in fear. How could one lick this Nazi excrement?

Then one of them yelled: "Let's go to work!" And several Jews really tried to collect the excrement with their hands and throw it into the toilet bowls. That, however, was impossible. At best, one could only smear the excrement. It was impossible to clean the entry room and the gymnasium in this way. The Nazis laughed at and ridiculed us, but they finally brought a shovel, a broom, a bucket, and a few rags. We turned on the water faucet. However, one would have needed a fire hose for this job. I took one of the rags, in terrible fear of being killed by one of these Nazis in this cellar, and threw the excrement into the toilet bowl while trying to hide behind other Jews. The whole thing lasted a quarter of an hour to twenty minutes, during which time we were trying to obey the Nazi's orders. We were not very successful. And while I squatted and bent over in order to make myself, in my fear, as little as possible, I lifted my eyes up, just in time to meet precisely the gaze of one of the laughing Nazis who were standing there with their swastika bands on their brown shirts. I recognized him right away; he was a classmate of mine from the elementary school. Although I had left that elementary school in 1929, and nine years had passed in the meantime, I knew right away that this Nazi was a boy with whom I had gone to class for the first four years. Once we even sat next to each other and played in the courtyard together. His name was Lichtenegger. I will never forget that.

And this former schoolmate Lichtenegger looked at me--and recognized me just as I had recognised him. This recognition was uncomfortable and embarrassing for him. I noticed this in a split second; I felt that he did not want to lower me, the Jew who he knew, but the anonymous Jew, the Jewish stereotype of Nazi racial madness. "The Jew" is vermin which needs to be squashed, destroyed, but the classmate Grab who he knew as a fellow human being was excluded from this rule. These were his thoughts; I understood this within a second when our eyes met. I then got up to throw away the rag and walked up to Lichtenegger while the other Jews were trying to clean up the excrement. In my best Viennese accent I said to him: "Listen, Lichtenegger, you know me, let me out of here." He lowered his eyes, tore off a piece of newspaper which was

lying around for cleaning the excrement, and wrote on it: "The Jew can walk out of here." Apparently he had some kind of small authority; he was some kind of a subleader of these Nazis. After he gave me the piece of paper without saying a word, I went to the cellar stairway and told the Nazi who guarded it: "Lichtenegger said I can get out of here," and I showed him the piece of paper. Then I ran upstairs, showed the piece of paper to the Nazi at the door, and ran home as fast as I could. No more than an hour had passed from the moment that I was stopped on the street until my flight from the gymnasium. (pp. 31-33)

This episode speaks for itself. These young Nazi thugs had little to gain in materialistic sense for humiliating their fellow citizens who happened to be Jewish. No one ordered them to do this, they just wanted to have a little fun. The atmosphere created during the Third Reich obviously encouraged many to humiliate the Jews. However, as the Grab story indicates, there is a difference for an average "decent" citizen between the "amorphous, abstract Jew" and a personal acquaintance.

The question of guilt and culpability is a complex one. The German president Richard von Weizsäcker, in his remarkable speech during a commemorative ceremony in the plenary room of the German Bundestag (the lower chamber of the parliament), on May 8, 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, perceptively characterized the genocide of Jews:

This crime was perpetrated by a few people. It was concealed from the eyes of the public, but every German was able to experience the range of emotions that his Jewish compatriots had to endure--from plain apathy and hidden intolerance to outright hatred. Who could remain unsuspecting after the burning of the synagogues, the plundering, the stigmatization with the Star of David, the deprivation of rights, the ceaseless violation of human dignity? Whoever opened his eyes and ears and sought information could not fail to notice that Jews were being deported. The nature and scope of the destruction may have exceeded human imagination but, apart from the crime itself, there was an attempt by too many people, including those of my generation who were young and uninvolved in the planning and execution of these events, to ignore what was

happening. There were many ways to avoid burdening one's conscience, to shun responsibility, to look the other way to keep mum. When the unspeakable truth of the Holocaust became known at the end of the war, all too many of us claimed that we had not known anything about it or even suspected anything.

There is no such thing as the guilt or innocence of an entire nation. Guilt is, like innocence, not collective, but personal and individual guilt is either discovered or concealed. There is guilt which people acknowledge or deny. Everyone who directly experienced that era should today quietly ask himself about his involvement then.

Unfortunately, not all Germans, or even non-Germans, are willing to confront their collective history. Even the present-day chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany,

Helmut Kohl, plainly states that he is blessed "by the grace of late birth" (Gnade der späten Geburt).